

TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

Philosophical Institute of Victoria.

Anniversary Address of the President, His Honor Sir William Foster Stawell, Knight, Chief Justice of Victoria, &c., &c.

[Delivered to the Members of the Institute, 12th April, 1858.]

YOUR EXCELLENCY AND GENTLEMEN,

I KNOW very well that I have not been selected for the high office which I occupy in consequence of any scientific attainments which I possess. I have been always engaged in the work of a very laborious profession—always too jealous of my devoting myself to any other studies than those immediately connected with it; and thus I am the more indebted to your kindness in having placed me in this position. It is, perhaps, in consequence of my holding another office that I have received this honor, and feeling that in doing honor to the office you do honor to the man, I beg to thank you, gentlemen, for both; I also feel, and I trust I am not

wrong in the supposition, that a suggestion may have operated on the minds of some members in selecting me, as I have always understood that a society of this kind does, in no country, merely tend to the improvement and cultivation of science, but also creates a social intercourse; and I, therefore, regard this as neutral ground upon which we can all meet. Gentlemen, I am debarred, as you are aware, from participation in the politics of the country, and I dare not express a single opinion upon any subject which is likely to come before me in my capacity as a judge; but, fortunately, this is a subject upon which I am free to enter and express an opinion. I am right well aware that there is much for us to do, and, on behalf of this society, I very cordially thank his Excellency for the frank, open, and manly way in which he pointed out what we ought to do. It is a true friend who tells us what our failings are, and who not merely praises us. But he will allow me to say, that he has not seen the troubles through which we have gone, recognizing, as I may, in this instance, those difficulties which every society in its infancy has to encounter. I cannot help congratulating the Institute on the progress which it has already made. Some few years ago, I well remember, when I was in office, absents myself from an early meeting of what was the first Institution, on the plea of urgent official duties. And I remember that my hon. friend, who sits on my immediate right, and who was my predecessor in the chair which I have now the honor to occupy, told me that the encouragement of such societies was of as much importance as official or any other class of duties; that the influence which such institutions were calculated to produce on the state of society was just as of much importance as any motion which I might have the honor of submitting to the Assembly; or any case which I might have the responsibility of conducting in court. Although I was not then sufficiently impressed with the truth

of his observations, I am now confirmed in a belief which I afterwards entertained, that all he said was true. At that time, the society, I confess, had not any very pleasing or encouraging prospects—it numbered only a very few members—and its meetings were held in a small room in the Assay Office. It had also, at that time, a most formidable rival, whilst but few of its own members interested themselves very strenuously in its progress. Now, however, the two bodies have become united, and I am rejoiced to say, that by union strength has been produced. Gentlemen, let us compare the numbers in this hall with those few men who sat in that little room, and recall, for example, the paper on the Yan Yean Water Works. I know of no subject more likely than that to interest the uninitiated; and, although the prophet was in that instance at fault, he does not the less deserve our thanks for the calm and philosophic way in which he pursued his subject. He might have been wrong: but let these instances operate as beacons for our future guidance. Compare the subjects then brought under consideration with those now discussed. Those most interesting to the more scientific members may not be interesting to the general reader; but there are still some couched in simple language, which I myself can not only understand, but appreciate—most interesting papers on scientific subjects, embracing geography, mineralogy, physics, botany, and a number of others, which I merely mention as those which are of interest to the general reader. I regret, that in taking a hasty glance over the transactions and occurrences of the last year, that I have to allude to the loss of one—a loss, indeed, not only to the society, but to the profession of which he was an ornament, and to many friends with whom he was intimate, and by whom he was greatly respected. Passing over that unfortunate event, let me congratulate the Institute on the amount

of interest which the Government now evidently takes in its progress and success. I rejoice to see so many members of the Government present. Occupying the position that I now do, it is of very little consequence to me who is in and who is out of power, although, notwithstanding that I am debarred from interfering with political matters, I cannot, as a citizen, exclude myself from taking some degree of interest in the actions of those who are in power; and I hail, as a good omen, the fact of so many of my honorable friends supporting this Institute by their presence this evening; and I trust that they will be prepared to support it, if necessary, by other and more substantial proofs of their regard. Not that I wish for State aid to an institution of this kind. On the contrary, I would wish to see the voluntary principle applied to it, although I would not for other things. I would fain see science with some recognised habitation—where scientific men could meet together and exercise some influence on society, because, as it is, the world, I fear, is too apt to look upon the Institute as a wanderer upon the face of the earth, who has no known habitation; and, perhaps, it may be necessary to trouble the friends of the Institute, in order to establish it. So far, and no farther, would I wish to see a demand made upon the public purse. If the Legislature of this country chooses to place funds at the disposal of the society, it will, I have no doubt, expend them judiciously and honestly. What we want, are persons with a helping and a lending hand. This is required in the old country, and how much more is it needed here. I do not know the reason why, but, perhaps, it originates in the matter-of-fact disposition which is our main characteristic, Art, instead of following, precedes science. Observe, for example, the Exhibition, and look at art as compared with merely scientific institutions—the one is regarded as a subject

of the greatest interest by the people, whilst the other is only tolerable. It is not so in other countries. In Germany, for instance, the *savans* are satisfied to promote science for the purpose of eliciting truth and making discoveries in their various branches. But, with an Englishman, unless you can bring home to him the conviction that it is of some practical advantage, he will do little more than tolerate it. Surely, gentlemen, science should precede art—and not art, science. Surely, science, instead of pointing out some discovery, brought out by some mere manipulator, should itself point out the mode in which the particular principle might be applied to the particular object. If, gentlemen, that principle is true at home, is it not with tenfold force true in this country? Assume that all such were based on scientific principles, I ask what would be the probability of success? I need not enlarge upon those influences, for I have already alluded to them, though briefly. Look at education, as applied to the youth and to the adult. To the adult, what salutary effects it must produce; it will show him how little he knows and how much remains to be known. What docility and what patience it will require to convince him that amongst the few grains of truth which he has acquired, there is an extensive sea of error. How much better, therefore, he must be prepared to make allowances for all the errors of his brethren, when he is capable of recognising his own. Observe also, gentlemen, the influence which it is likely to exercise in unfolding the works of the Creator himself, and the praise which, in prosecuting these discoveries, he is involuntarily offering up to the Creator, in the truths which he is unfolding to the world. Gentlemen, I proposed to have said much more to you, but I feel that, for an inaugural address, instead of writing, I have trusted too much to memory. I thank you for the patience with which you have heard my

remarks, and for the honor conferred upon me, as well as the manner in which you have received the toast with which my name has been coupled. I trust that when I shall be rendering up an account of my stewardship, you will think I am deserving of as enthusiastic a reception as that which you have now been good enough to accord me.
